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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a study of children's abilities to make inferences about an actor's plans and to use these inferences to assign blame and praise. Preschool children were presented with eight stories combining good and bad intentions with final outcomes that were either intended or accidental (foreseeable or unforeseeable side effects). Results indicated that young children differentiate accidental circumstances from intentional ones and use this distinction to evaluate an actor's behavior: but that when children have difficulty interpreting plans, it is because they fail to coordinate assertions about the actor's beliefs, knowledge and expectations with the assumed goal. (Author/MP)

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Children's Interpretation of Planfulness in Social Episodes Implications for Moral Judgment

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This paper presents a study of children's ability to make inferences about an actor's plans and to use these inferences to assign blame and praise. Preschool children were presented with eight stories combining good and bad intentions with final outcomes that were either intended or accidental (foreseeable or unforeseeable side effects). Results suggest that: 1) young children differentiate accidental circumstances from intentional ones and use this distinction to evaluate an actor's behavior; but 2) when children have difficulty interpreting plans, it is because they fail to coordinate assertions about the actor's beliefs, knowledge and expectations with the assumed goal.

Preschool Children's Interpretations of Planfulness in Social Episodes: Implications for Moral Judgment

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The research that I am reporting here has to do with purposes and purposefulness, with motives, dispositions, goals and intentions; in other words with the personal, psychological causes and reasons assumed to instigate human behavior. Every day in our social interaction we face the task of "making sense" out of the actions of others. Difficulty in interpreting the behavior of others can lead to difficulty in understanding and reacting to events experienced in daily life and in understanding the actions of characters in a written narrative or in a television episode (Bruce, 1977; Sedlak, 1977).

For the most part, adults and older children handle this task efficiently--so that they are able to process human social behavior in terms of social "acts" rather than as strings of "disconnected actions." This accomplishment--viewing an action as a step in a plan--is one of the most complex inferential tasks that people accomplish, and children require many years to acquire the needed skills.

By attributing a plan, or intentional structure to actor, an observer can construct and test out in an organized fashion answers to such questions as: Why did that person just do what she did? Was her act intentional or accidental? What goal, if any, prompted it? Consider the implications

that various different answers would have for our evaluation of her act and therefore her as a person. That is, we could regard her as blameworthy, praiseworthy, or neither, on the basis of these answers.

The extensive literature on moral development suggests that young children have difficulty understanding social actions and assigning responsibility and hence fail to make mature evaluation of praise and blame. Piaget suggested that the concepts of motive emerges at about the same time as the first "whys" around the age of three to four years (Piaget, 1932). Recently, investigators (Berndt & Berndt, 1975; Keasy, 1978) have suggested that children may learn to understand and differentiate motives at an earlier age than intentionality. It has been demonstrated that young children can perceive motives and goals and do use that perception in evaluating behavior (Nelson, 1980); however they may experience difficulty in distinguishing accidental acts from intentional ones. Failure to make the accidental/intentional distinction may be due to the young child's tendency to overattribute intention, i.e., to assume that accors intend all the outcomes they effect. The child does not yet realize that other people's behavior is not always necessarily intelligent or even intentional (Piaget, 1932). Older children's and adults' judgments of intentional behavior may indicate a restriction of the notion of intention to the actor's main goal even though the means to the goal is also an intentional act.

The research that I want to share with you today is part of a larger ongoing project which concerns the development of notions about psychological causality in young children. Specifically, this research concerns children's ability to use information about planfulness in order to assign

responsibility to an actor for an event and to make evaluative inferences about the actor's behavior.

Preschool boys and girls (mean age = 4 years, 1 month) participated in the study with parental consent. The children were verbally presented with eight very short versions of a story, constructed by combining good and bad motivating goals and outcomes and by varying the intentionality of the outcomes.

The outcomes of the stories were designed to be perceived by adults as either intentional or accidental. The actor's action in all story versions was voluntary. In intentional stories the actor intended the behavior he engaged in to achieve a social goal. In these stories although the effected outcome was foreseeable by the actor because he could have known the social outcome of his actions; it was either intended and foreseen, or unintended and unforeseen. In accidental stories the actor did not intend the behavior he engaged in to produce the effect. The effected outcome in accidental stories was not foreseeable and the behavior which produced it did not occur as a part of some plan preconceived by the actor to achieve a social goal. All stories were presented verbally and were accompanied by a series of black and white line drawings to illustrate the nature of the actor's motivations, actions, and effected outcomes.

Procedure

Children were interviewed individually by the experimented. At the beginning of the test session, the children were familiarized with each point on the rating scale and then given two practice stories to define the "very good" and "very bad" endpoints of the scale. Children were also asked to tell what the terms "on purpose," "accident," and "to plan" meant.

In the experimental session the children were told to listen very carefully, because later they would have to tell the stories aloud and answer questions about them.

Every child heard all eight stories; order of presentation was chosen at random and separately for each child. After each story the child was asked to recall it and answer a number of questions about the episode. Children were asked: (1) whether the actor planned to perform the action that caused the final outcome, (2) whether the connection between this action and the final outcome could have been foreseen by the actor, (3) whether this connection was actually foreseen by the actor, and (4) whether the actor was trying to achieve the outcome in the story, i.e., whether the outcome was the actor's goal. Finally, children rated the actor on a seven-point scale ranging from very naughty (1) to very nice (7). Children's responses to this interview were tape-recorded, and the transcribed interviews were scored as yes or no with 100% agreement between two independent judges.

Plan Interpretation

Data are presented to address two main issues of interest. The first concerned the children's ability to recognize the actor's plans. Subjects' answers to the set of interview questions about the actor's goals constituted the data on plan interpretation. The percentage of positive responses is shown in Table 1 of your handout.

Insert Table 1 about here

Intentional stories. As can be seen in Table 1, children were more

likely to perceive good-motive actors causing good outcomes to have planned their actions (100%) than those actors with good motive but causing bad outcomes (32%). For actors with bad motives, children were more likely to perceive those who achieved bad outcomes as having planned (82%) than those who achieved good outcomes (25%).

This same pattern of motive x outcome interaction (all p's $<.001$) occurred in the data for responses to questions about whether the actor foresaw the outcome and whether the outcome was really the actor's goal. Children were more likely to perceive actors with good motives causing good outcomes and actors with bad motives causing bad outcomes as having foreseen and tried to produce those outcomes. On the contrary, bad motive actors causing good outcomes and good-motive actors causing bad outcomes were less likely to be perceived as having foreseen or tried to produce their outcomes.

In response to the foreseeability of effected outcomes in intentional stories, more children perceived the good outcomes of good-motive actors as foreseeable than bad outcomes produced by good motive actors. On the other hand, good and bad outcomes of bad-motive actors were perceived as foreseeable equally as often.

Accidental stories. The only significant effect was for type of motive presented in the accidental stories, $p < .002$. As Table 1 indicates, children were more likely to perceive the effected outcomes of actors with bad motives as foreseeable (61%) than those effected by actors with good motives (39%).

Likewise, outcomes of actors with bad motives were more likely to be perceived as foreseen (55%) than those of actors with good motives (36%).

The findings from the plan interpretation interview that are most pertinent can be summarized as follows. The vast majority of children had

little difficulty recognizing when the effected outcome was the actor's goal and when it was not regardless of the type of motive or outcome in stories where the behavior causing the outcomes was produced within the actor's "plan"--or intentional goal structure (see Table 2). In accidental stories (where all outcomes were unforeseeable), however, there was a marginally significant tendency toward perceiving the effected outcomes of bad-motive actors as their goals more often than to perceive the outcomes of good-motive actors as the goals. That is in accidental story versions actors with bad motives are more likely to be seen as responsible for their outcomes than are actors with good motive. In addition, outcomes purposely caused by actors with good motives were judged as foreseen more often than those caused by actors with bad motives. In contrast, accidentally effected outcomes were judged as foreseen more often when the actor's motive was bad rather than good.

Insert Table 2 about here

Moral Judgment

The second issue of interest concerns the extent to which children's ratings of actors were influenced by the type of motive and level of intentionality presented in the stories. Results of analyses performed on the evaluative rating data (see Table 3) indicated that type of motive interacted with level of intentionality to influence the children's ratings of the actors. There was greater differentiation between actors with good versus bad motives when the outcomes were intentionally caused than when they were accidentally caused. Actors in the intentional episodes

were held more responsible for their behavior and its effects than actors in the accidental episodes. Thus, actors with good motives are rated more positively in intentional stories than they are in accidental stories, while actors with bad motives are rated less negatively in accidental stories than they are in intentional stories.

Insert Table 3 about here

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that the difficulty children experience in understanding and evaluating the actions of others is not due to a failure to perceive intentions and motives behind actions. Rather, children seem not to recognize that there is a lot more to a plan than a goal.

If an effected outcome is interpreted to be the actor's goal, then the observer must also be willing to admit that the actor performed at least some of his/her actions in order to cause the outcome. Assuming these conscious, voluntary links of instrumentality between actions and goal outcome, the observer must also assume that the actor had foresight, or prior knowledge, and certain beliefs of expectations at the outset of the planned sequence. Specifically, it must be assumed that the actor could expect and did believe that the outcome would occur as a result of the planned actions. Note that these assumptions are logically related and if one of these assumptions is accepted, the rest must also be accepted. Since young children do not recognize all the additional

assertions which must be made, they fail to construct and test coordinated hypotheses about the actor's beliefs, knowledge, expectations and goals (see Sedlak, 1977). They fail to search for evidence in the information given about the actual sequence of events that contradicts the assertions they do not recognize as necessarily implied. Such evidence seems to them irrelevant to the interpretation of the actor's plan. Thus, children will fail to reject the hypotheses about the actor's goal more often and in more circumstances than the average adult and consequently assign responsibility (blame or praise) to actors for desired outcomes that were not planfully achieved.

In conclusion, the results of the present research suggest that making a moral judgment requires understanding of the evaluative concepts (i.e., "good," "bad") to be applied. Also required is comprehension of the motives or goals involved (e.g., "sharing," "helping," "revenge"). A child must also be able to recognize and interpret the interrelationship between actions, motives, goals, and outcomes in order to make evaluative judgments. The development of these competencies deserves further investigation if we are to advance our present understanding of the beliefs children have about purposeful actions and social relationships.

Table 1

Percentage of positive responses to each interview question by level of motive, level of outcome and level of intentionality

	Intentionality							
	Intentional				Accidental			
Motive/outcome*	GG	GB	BG	BB	GG	GB	BG	BB
Plan	100	32	25	82	46	32	46	50
Foreseeable	93	61	82	79	43	36	68	54
Foreseen	96	43	36	79	43	28	57	54
Try	100	28	36	75	39	32	50	50

* Motives and outcomes presented in each story version took on two values: Good (G) and Bad (B).

Table 2

Average Percentage of Stories where Outcome is seen as Actor's Goal

Goal	Foreseeable Side Effect	Unforeseeable Side Effect
87.5	32.5	41

Table 3

Mean Rating of Actor's Goodness/Badness as a Function of Level of Motive, Outcome and Intentionality

	Intentionality			
	Intentional		Accidental	
	Motive			
	Good	Bad	Good	Bad
Outcome				
Good	6.25	2.64	5.10	2.93
Bad	5.07	1.82	4.17	2.71

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